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THE CHALLENGES OF GLASNOST FOR WESTERN INTELLIGENCE

by

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can fail in properly assessing an alien political culture. Problems inherent in formulating assessments of the Soviets by the West in the earlier post war environment are also addressed. The lessons and legacies respectively of these experiences are then applied to the presently evolving situation. The bottom line is that glasnost is adding yet another layer of confusion for Western intelligence agencies and political leaders in assessing the nature and direction of developments in the Soviet Union. Glasnost does indeed provide some promises of progress in arms control verification, tantalizing glimpses of Soviet realities, and access to interesting debates on defense policy. But all of this could help to foster greater controversy within and among Western intelligence communities and the political elites which they serve. At the same time, it could further engender a public complacency in the West that bodes ill for continued defense and intelligence efforts and undermines Western solidarity. This will occur at the very time that the paradigms of the past forty years lie shattered and the Allies face a world of heightened uncertainty and ambiguity.

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THE CHALLENGES OF GLASNOST FOR WESTERN INTELLIGENCE

Concerning Glasnost

Contrary to current widespread usage in the West, glasnost does not mean "openness." Its most proximate English definition in standard Russian usage would be "publicity," i.e., making public or making known.¹ Appreciating this difference is critical to better understanding the original intent of glasnost in terms of its domestic political context. It is also critical to better assessing the implications of glasnost for us in the West. In particular, it is vital to a better understanding of the challenges and wider implications of this concept for Western intelligence communities.

Glasnost represents an attempt by President Mikhail Gorbachev to motivate the generally impassive Soviet public to help carry out his restructuring (perestroika) of Soviet society.² It was meant to be used to point out deficiencies in the system, and was not an end in itself. Although glasnost is a phenomenon dating back to tsarist times, Gorbachev makes one to understand that he ultimately takes his cue from Lenin:

Lenin said: More light! Let the Party know everything! ...glasnost...makes it possible for people to understand better...what is taking place now. What we are striving for and what our plans are, and on the basis

of this understanding, to participate in the restructuring effort consciously.

...social and economic changes are gaining momentum largely thanks to the development of glasnost.³

Glasnost also was intended to serve Gorbachev's purposes by putting additional pressure on officials reluctant to follow his lead. It remains one of his weapons for breaking bureaucratic resistance while trying to mobilize broader support for his agenda:⁴

Not everyone...likes the new style. This is especially true of those who are not used to...working in the conditions of glasnost and broad criticism...⁵

Broader publicity is a matter of principle to us. Without publicity there is not...political creativity of the citizens and participation by the citizens in administration and management.⁶

Above all, glasnost shares with perestroika the aim of strengthening the Soviet state by making it more efficient:

Glasnost is aimed at strengthening our society. Criticism is a bitter medicine, but the ills that plague society make it a necessity.

A slackening of criticism will inevitably harm perestroika.⁷

Everything that takes place in a Socialist state is a concern of the people. That is why we stand for openness, criticism and self-criticism in order to make a radical change in every sphere of our social life.

Herein lies a guarantee against the repetition of past errors, and consequently a guarantee that the restructuring process is irreversible.⁸

Gorbachev's glasnost is a peculiarly Russian phenomenon, as it is part of an attempt to impose reform from above. It is also to some extent an effort to equip an undemocratic government with some semblance of public accountability. But this is rather a question of style more than of substance. Gorbachev has sought

to assuage his more cautious colleagues that glasnost can serve as a means of mass control as well.⁹ Nonetheless, the Soviet leaders themselves do have a use for glasnost. It helps them to know better what is happening in the domestic economy and it exposes problems within the lower echelons of the bureaucracy.¹⁰ However, the situation has gone well beyond the original intent, as evidenced by the nationalist unrest in various republics, especially Lithuania.

Glasnost serves Gorbachev another traditional Russian purpose. It helps him to discredit some of his predecessors--especially Leonid Brezhnev--and in turn, the functionaries and institutions that Gorbachev has inherited from him.¹¹ Gorbachev can then blame the ills of Soviet society on bankrupt leaders and policies of the past. He can also purge the elites left over from earlier times by indicting them as incompetent, corrupt, or both.¹² This process thus puts pressure on the Soviet establishment both from above and from below.

Gorbachev appears to be facing demands and hopes not unlike those that faced Nikita Krushchev a generation before, during the post-Stalin thaw. But Gorbachev wants to avoid Krushchev's mistakes.¹³ One tactic to accomplish this is to use glasnost in an effort to build domestic public pressure to his own advantage. Another is to use glasnost to improve the Soviet image in the West. Improved relations can then be used to pursue more advantageous economic relations and thereby help the badly ailing Soviet economy through an infusion of badly needed technology, capital, and know-how from the West. This is yet another tradi-

tional Russian stratagem employed repeatedly over the centuries to Moscow's advantage. Not only would this serve to bolster Gorbachev's own political standing at home, it would also help to make the Soviet Union economically more resilient and thereby bolster the Soviet regime's hold on power. However, this intent has not been realized.

The Impact Of Glasnost In The West

Whatever his domestic standing, Gorbachev is enjoying a public relations coup in the West. In this regard, glasnost could hold tremendous consequences for overall Western defense efforts, including intelligence. By exploiting the atmosphere engendered by glasnost, Gorbachev is projecting a vastly more benign image of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev and other Kremlin leaders are indeed depriving the West of a threat perception upon which to focus its defense efforts. They are now doing this at an almost frenetic pace. Recent events elsewhere in the Warsaw Pact are dramatically intensifying this process of diminishing the threat as well.

Gorbachev's liberalization has provided the cornerstone of an extremely successful effort to appeal directly over the heads of Western leaders to intellectual elites and mass opinion.¹⁴ Because the Western approach toward the East is so complex and multifaceted, it is readily undermined in the public eye by patently simple and short term answers. It is in the field of arms control and disarmament that Gorbachev has been most adept at

this. The reason is that one of his principal goals is to convince the West that it no longer needs to keep up its guard, while Moscow has materially yielded relatively little so far.¹⁵ But this process also seems to be assuming a powerful dynamic of its own.

In such an environment, the potential adverse impact on Western defense efforts overall, including intelligence, becomes worrisome. A diminished threat perception will undercut public support for defense. This in turn will decrease support for defense spending by legislators. This in its turn will hasten and exacerbate the cuts in funds that can already be felt in the national defense efforts among the Western Allies because of budgetary pressures. Whatever is undone in this manner will not be remedied so quickly should the perceived threat ever change again for the worse.

What Historic Precedent Tells Us

The haste engendered by public euphoria in the West raises concern in the light of historic experience. First, there is Russian and Soviet history. An old adage has it that everything in Russia has happened before, and Moscow has this already mentioned centuries-old tradition of flirtatious openings to the West.¹⁶ These episodes were cleverly exploited by the leaders who initiated such contacts in order to gain some clear material advantage--usually to strengthen their own power position. Among the earlier practitioners were Peter the Great and Catherine the

Great. This is a tactic which has survived through Lenin's time down to our own era.

Another area of concern is the manner in which democratic societies have assessed the threat posed by totalitarian societies. Generally, it seems difficult for people of one type of society to realistically assess an adversary, especially if that antagonist possesses an alien political culture. Such ethnocentrism thus seems to be a severe handicap for Western democracies when confronted by totalitarian rivals.

A sobering example is provided by the erratic British intelligence assessment of Nazi Germany during the 1930's. Despite an initial assessment of Germany as Britain's ultimate threat in Europe, London's threat perception underwent a succession of wild swings. These were driven by a variety of competing interest groups within the British government. Such drastic vacillations contributed to the disastrous policies followed by Britain before World War II.

The British intelligence effort of the 1930's was hobbled in large measure by:

- a lack of appreciation or priority for the intelligence effort on the part of the government;
- a false sense of confidence toward the Germans on the part of the British;
- a penchant for mirror imaging and wishful thinking, such as imputing Anglo-Saxon values to the Nazis;
- acceptance of Nazi propaganda and official pronouncements at face value when lacking pertinent information from

other sources; and

- a flood of information from allegedly good sources at critical junctures or crisis points.

The net result of the above factors was that bad policy was matched by a grave misreading of the threat.¹⁷ Indeed, the expectations and prejudices on the part of London's policy makers even made the British receptive to much of the faulty intelligence which they received.¹⁸

Great Britain's effort to assess Nazi Germany went through several phases of alternating optimism and despair. This progression included a honeymoon period in the mid-1930's. That interlude was marked by protracted efforts on the part of London to attain arms limitation agreements with Berlin. These years even witnessed visits by service attaches to German bases, maneuver sites, and production facilities--albeit on carefully controlled itineraries--as well as cordial officer exchanges.¹⁹ The immediate parallels to recent, well publicized U.S.-Soviet activities appear rather striking.

Although there was much overt collection at this time, British intelligence officials persisted in their failure to present a consistent and evenhanded assessment of Nazi Germany's strengths and weakness.²⁰ Worse yet, the British were unable to fathom the ideology and mentality behind Nazi policies. As a result, the perceptions and biases of the political leadership in London--selectively reinforced by the erratic intelligence which it received--exerted enormous influence on the final, flawed assessments of Nazi Germany.²¹

Western Assessments Of The Soviet Threat Before Glasnost

If British intelligence in the 1930's underwent drastic vacillations, U.S.-led Western Allied efforts to assess the Soviet threat since the late 1940's have tended consistently toward pessimistic scenarios. Moscow's penchant for secrecy, coupled with the ambiguous appearance of much of Soviet activity, forced Western Allied officials to assume the worst. This process was compounded by the political atmosphere that has prevailed over the Cold War era.²²

Now Washington and its allies are faced with a situation that brings into question the interpretations of Soviet intentions as understood over the past forty-odd years. Moscow appears to be undergoing an ostensibly major discontinuity in its historical pattern of behavior. Many of the Western public and political elites have been quick to accept this phenomenon at face value. Promising events elsewhere in Eastern Europe now intensify their hopeful expectations. Western governments which have consistently taken pessimistic views in the past are now being greeted with criticism and skepticism, even when simply trying to take a prudent, long-term and balanced approach.

The Challenges Of Glasnost For Western Intelligence

Glasnost poses an array of challenges for Western intelligence over the coming years. Many of these challenges will broadly parallel the problems that plagued the British

intelligence effort of the 1930's. One long-standing, persistent obstacle is the traditional Russian penchant for secrecy. This conspiratorial mentality remains very difficult for Westerners to fathom fully, rooted as it is in Russian and Soviet history. It will leave Moscow as enigmatic to foreigners as ever. Gorbachev himself has subscribed to the continued need for it:

In the context of the growing subversive activity by imperialist special services against the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, greater responsibility devolves upon the state security bodies. We are convinced that Soviet security forces...will always...display vigilance, self-control and tenacity in the struggle against any encroachment on our political and social system.²³

Accordingly, glasnost does not apply equally to more sensitive areas such as defense and industrial production. Nor does it apply as equally to the secret police or to the current party leadership elite.

Those occasions at which Western media have access to Soviet officials or sensitive activities or installations remain tightly controlled.²⁴ Glasnost has been more shallow when applied to the Soviet military, though this appears to be gradually changing. If anything, glasnost generates concern among Soviet military officers for its potentially disruptive effect on military morale and unit effectiveness.²⁵

Nonetheless, top military leaders have become selectively vocal on topical and newsworthy issues, even if these occasional forays are intended largely for Western consumption.²⁶

Another major challenge will be to sift the wheat from the chaff. It is still not always clear as to what are the limits and the rules of the game regarding glasnost. Different Soviet

officials seem to be applying diverse interpretations.²⁷ There is also always the lingering concern that the Soviets at any given instance could be engaged in their traditional ploy of disinformation as well.

Ironically, the attendant confusion on the part of Western observers seems only to help encourage unrealistic and speculative expectations in the West regarding Soviet intentions. For example, the recent stir created by open discussion of defense policy in Moscow has its basis in the views of well connected individuals challenging established views. This should not be confused with officially sanctioned policy decisions or accepted doctrine.²⁸

Nevertheless, the domain of public discussion has expanded dramatically. As a result, a wide range of topics concerning the ills of Soviet society, including data once deemed compromising, is now being made public. The result has been an unprecedented disclosure about certain facets of life in the Soviet Union.²⁹ This has allowed analysts, historians, and other specialists in the West to make comparisons of their previous estimates with the newly released information. But at the same time, this proliferation of data demands careful sorting.³⁰ Validating and exploiting this inundation of material still requires discriminating and excruciating detective work. In the more critical and sensitive areas, it will still remain necessary to read between the lines and look for hidden messages in official statements.³¹

One sensitive area that does appear to offer some promise

of progress over the near term is arms control. This process is being pushed by Gorbachev out of dire economic--above all, fiscal--necessity and the challenges posed by Western technological superiority. Particularly helpful in this respect is Gorbachev's unprecedented acceptance of on site verification:

In today's international situation, with its deficit of mutual trust, verification measures are indispensable. Whether it is verification using national monitoring facilities or international verification procedures, it should necessarily mean control over compliance with concrete agreements.³²

The first actual opening in this regard has been Gorbachev's acceptance of intrusive verification procedures for the Intermediate-range Nuclear Force (INF) treaty. It remains to be seen how far this precedent with INF will be allowed to extend to arms control regimes more urgent to Soviet interests and perceived security needs.

The arms control process will present a challenge as well as an opportunity. The challenge over the longer term will be to help maintain a steady vigilance on the part of the West despite popular optimism. It will take years to draw conclusions with any certainty regarding the dynamic processes now underway. Particularly critical will be the need to support prudent Allied efforts in arms control negotiations, and to help maintain public support in pursuing Western security interests in those negotiations.

A very different challenge for intelligence will come from Western electorates and their political leaderships, especially in Western Europe. This challenge will entail coping with swings in mood and the impact these swings could have with lowered

government priorities and budgetary support for intelligence efforts. The problem will be to maintain a steady policy course despite being reproached or even ignored because of consistently pessimistic reportage over the past forty years.

These problems will be confronting Western intelligence communities precisely at a juncture when intelligence will be especially vital to critically examining and verifying or disputing Soviet claims in the arms control arena and elsewhere. In such a setting, the role of intelligence will be particularly critical in assessing the direction of Soviet policy and all of the implications that this will hold for U.S.--as well as Allied--policies and plans.

The increasing interaction between domestic and foreign affairs is causing intelligence information to take on larger significance in domestic politics. The temptation for politicians to use it when appealing to voting publics or legislatures is particularly strong in democratic societies.³³ Gorbachev himself appears to appreciate this phenomenon and seems to be gauging his public performance accordingly.

Swings in public and leadership moods--ranging from euphoric optimism to panic or alarm--could provide an uncertain and ambiguous domestic political setting for Western intelligence communities. There will be considerable political pressure and temptation for elected leaders and their appointees to conform the interpretation of intelligence information to their own evolving views of the world. Intelligence could then become increasingly a pawn of politics as some Western leaders try to re-

act to or even seek to shape events in the East. They may well exploit intelligence in efforts to support their unique views or agendas in domestic and inter-allied debates over how to deal with Moscow.

The very ambiguity of the evolving future environment will likely be further complicated by the mixed signals to be expected from the East. Such a state of affairs will only leave the intelligence process further vulnerable to manipulation or exploitation by political leaders to suit their respective political expediencies, a situation not unlike that in Britain in the 1930's. That in turn would present a particularly dangerous state of affairs if the leadership in Moscow continued to play so masterfully to Western hopes and fears as it does at present.

Related to the question of avoiding excessive swings in political mood is the question of old versus new paradigms, as well as paradigms traditionally favored respectively by liberals and conservatives. All too often, Westerners of whatever political persuasion have been able to see in the Soviet Union whatever they wanted to see.³⁴ In turn, the controversy over what is transpiring in the Soviet Union at present will in the end actually be a debate over American and Allied policy direction toward Moscow.³⁵

In dealing with political leaders, Western intelligence agencies could be caught in another dilemma. They could face either a leadership that is so dogmatically caught up in old paradigms that it is not receptive to new information, or a leadership so receptive to new paradigms that it changes opinions

frequently and fails to provide a clear or firm direction.³⁶ Either excess would present an extremely difficult working environment for the intelligence communities.

Perhaps the most fundamental challenge facing Western intelligence agencies will be working on a long-term process in the face of short-term demands in an environment characterized by the most profound uncertainty and change since the end of World War II and the start of the Cold War. Only careful analysis over time will produce tangibly verifiable intelligence results. In the meantime, events could always take unexpected or even unwanted drastic turns. The profundity, drama, speed and scope of change may be as great or even greater than that which confronted the British in the 1930's.

A particularly painful duty for the Intelligence Community would be serving its role of the "Persian messenger," delivering unwanted bad news that contradicted popular expectations. This task would be critical to keep the West alert to the worst possible cases of Soviet behavior. Yet it is often acceptance at the political level that forms the weakest link in the intelligence process, and thus allows for unpleasant surprises.³⁷ It is this very role as "Persian messenger" then, that could prove to be the most thankless for the leaders of the intelligence agencies and put their moral courage to the severest test. This realization came too late to the British in the 1930's, only after having been overcome by events.

The Impact On Western Intelligence And Its Implications

Barring significant changes in prevailing circumstances, glasnost will continue to provide Gorbachev with an "apple of discord" against the West. Glasnost will help to foster controversy within Allied intelligence communities and the government leaderships which they serve. Intense debate elsewhere in the press and media, in academic forums, and in think tanks working for governments, will further compound the confusion. The paradigms of more than forty years appear to lie shattered without any clearly defined substitutes as yet in sight to build on in helping the West to manage historic change.

During this period of apparent flux, it will remain extremely difficult to formulate intelligence assessments of the evolving Soviet threat and the overall European situation with any great certainty. Yet, this will remain one of the most crucial tasks for Western Allied intelligence services as they:

- assess overall developments in the East,
- support Allied arms control negotiations with the Soviets, and
- prepare threat estimates to support the force planning of their respective governments in the face of budget cuts and diminishing resources.

The impact of discord over how to deal with the East will be felt increasingly not only within individual Allied intelligence services and governments, but even more so collectively among Alliance intelligence services and governments. North At-

lantic Treaty Organization (NATO) solidarity could be severely eroded as the United States and other allies find it increasingly difficult to agree in their assessments of the Soviet threat, its likely future evolution, and the appropriate responses to developments in the East. These divergent assessments and interpretations will likely be symptomatic of wider defense and foreign policy schisms that could presage the ultimate unravelling of NATO Allied efforts to manage change in Europe, if not properly addressed in a timely manner.

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